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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the findings of a joint committee of the American School Counselor Association and the Association for Assessment in Counseling in the development of a document describing the assessment and evaluation competencies school counselors need. Among the skills universally considered important were making decisions about which assessments to use, synthesizing results for use in treatment, and communicating and interpreting test results to parents and school personnel. (Contains 15 references and 2 tables.) (GCP)

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Chapter 31
Assessment Competencies for School Counselors

Patricia B. Elmore & Ruth B. Ekstrom

What assessment and evaluation skills and knowledge should school counselors have? That was the question put to a joint committee of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the Association for Assessment in Counseling (AAC).[1] The goal of the committee was to develop a document describing the assessment and evaluation competencies school counselors need.

There has been some documentation of school counselors' assessment skills and practices. Work behaviors related to assessment are fundamental to the general practice of counseling, according to a survey conducted by Sampson, Vacc, and Loesch (1998). Training in good test use practices is one of three competencies that counselors must have for adult personal and career assessments (Tymofievich & Leroux, 2000). Previous research by Elmore, Ekstrom, Diamond, and Whittaker (1993) found that 67 percent of a group of 423 ASCA members considered testing and assessment an important or very important part of their work. The counselors indicated that they are most often involved in test interpretation and administration. Although the counselors were highly confident in their ability to use test results in counseling, their responses regarding their actual test use practices were problematic. Only 57 percent said they always or almost always read the test manual to find out about any limitations of the test, and less than half (49 percent) said they always or almost always obtain additional information to support or refute test results. Only 36 percent always or almost always take into consideration differences between those being tested and the group(s) on which the test was normed.

Impara and Plake (1995) compared the measurement and assessment competencies of school administrators, counselors, and teachers; they found that in a typical school, the educational professionals who know the most about testing are the counselors. Teachers and principals, especially at the secondary level, rely on counselors as a resource to provide them with test information, to answer

measurement-related questions, and to interact with parents on testing issues.

The assessment activities of counselors are affected by their measurement knowledge and training. Elmore, Ekstrom, and Diamond (1993) found that good practices in test selection, test administration, and test interpretation were consistently and significantly associated with having read the *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education* (JCTP, 2002) or the *Responsibilities of Users of Standardized Tests* (AACD/AMECD, 1989). Good test use practices by counselors seem to derive from their measurement training; therefore, it is important for measurement professionals to develop counselor training programs and materials that will facilitate good test use.

Survey Findings

A subcommittee of the joint ASCA and AAC committee undertook a survey of the assessment activities of a random sample of school counselors. This confirmed that test interpretation and test administration were specific responsibilities for most school counselors. Of the responding school counselors, 91 percent said their work involved interpreting test results and using this information in counseling.

To identify essential assessment skills for school counselors, the subcommittee next conducted a survey of a random sample of ASCA members who indicated "school counselor" as their job setting (N = 600) and a random sample of ASCA members who indicated "counselor educator" as their job setting (N = 200). The survey consisted of a list of 39 assessment activities that were identified from state certification materials. These were assessment training requirements and skill expectations for school counselors. The respondents were asked to indicate how important it is for school counselors to be able to carry out each activity using a three-point scale: (3) essential, (2) desirable, and (1) not necessary.

Of the 179 school counselors who responded, 79 (44 percent) were elementary school counselors, 32 (18 percent) were middle school counselors, 50 (28 percent) were high school counselors, 9 (5 percent) were counseling administrators or supervisors, and the remainder reported other job titles. Most (77 percent) reported earning a degree in school counseling and guidance.

Of the 63 counselor educators responding, 75 percent had received a doctorate. Their degree fields included counselor education (41 percent), school counseling and guidance (37 percent), counseling and

school psychology (10 percent), and college student personnel (3 percent), with only 9 percent reporting other fields.

Essential Assessment Skills and Knowledge

Ten skills were rated as essential by 65 percent or more of both the school counselors and the counselor educators. Table 1 shows the percentages of counselors and counselor educators who rated each of the following ten skills as essential.

1. Referring students to other professionals, when appropriate, for additional assessment or appraisal
2. Interpreting scores from tests or assessments and using the information in counseling
3. Communicating and interpreting test or assessment information to students and helping them use it for educational and career planning
4. Making decisions about the types of assessments to use when counseling groups or individual students
5. Communicating and interpreting test or assessment information to parents
6. Reading about and being aware of ethical issues in assessment
7. Communicating and interpreting test or assessment information to teachers, school administrators, and other professionals
8. Making decisions about the types of assessments to use in planning and evaluating counseling programs
9. Synthesizing and integrating testing and nontesting data to make decisions about individuals
10. Reading about and being aware of current issues involving multicultural assessment, the assessment of individuals with disabilities and other special needs, and the assessment of language minorities

Parallels to many of these essential skills can be found in the ASCA *Role Statement* (1990) and the ASCA *Ethical Standards* (1998). For example, even though the school counselor is often seen as the person in a school most knowledgeable about assessment (Impara & Plake, 1995), both counselors and counselor educators stress the importance of referrals to other testing professionals. The *Role Statement* says, "Counselors are aware of their own professional competencies and . . . know when and how to involve other professionals" (p. 5)

Table 1. Assessment Skills Viewed as Essential by Both School Counselors (N=179) and Counselor Educators (N=63)

Skill	School Counselors	Counselor Educators
Refer students to other professionals, when appropriate, for additional assessment/appraisal	84%	89%
Interpret scores from tests/assessments and use the information in counseling	75%	81%
Communicate and interpret test/assessment information to students and help them use it for educational and career planning	73%	87%
Make decisions about the type(s) of assessments to use in counseling groups or individual students	71%	78%
Communicate and interpret test/assessment information to parents	71%	78%
Read about and be aware of ethical issues in assessment	70%	84%
Communicate and interpret test/assessment information to teachers, school administrators, and other professionals	68%	76%
Make decisions about the type(s) of assessments to use in planning and evaluating counseling programs	67%	67%
Synthesize and integrate testing and non-testing data to make decisions about individuals	67%	65%
Read about and be aware of current issues involving multicultural assessment, the assessment of individuals with disabilities and other special needs, and the assessment of language minorities	65%	68%

Less Important Assessment Skills and Knowledge

Four assessment skills were rated as not necessary by 25 percent or more of both the school counselors and the counselor educators. Table 2 shows the percentages of counselors and counselor educators who rating the following four nonessential assessment skills.

1. Scheduling testing or assessments
2. Administering individual standardized tests for diagnostic purposes
3. Conducting nonstandardized testing and assessments
4. Using assessment information to place or group students in classes

Table 2. Assessment Skills Considered Not Necessary by 25% or More of School Counselors (N=179) and Counselor Educators (N=63)

Skill	School Counselors	Counselor Educators
Schedule testing/assessments	30%	54%
Administer individual standardized tests for diagnostic purposes	33%	35%
Conduct non-standardized testing and assessments	31%	29%
Use assessment information to place/group students in classes	29%	29%

Some individuals may be surprised that skills required of or specified for school counselors in some states are considered unnecessary by many of the counselors and counselor educators who responded to this survey. Counselors are often expected to schedule testing sessions for state or locally mandated examinations, but many counselors and counselor educators object, saying that this is primarily a clerical task. While a few states require school counselors to be able to administer tests for diagnostic purposes, in most states this is a task assigned to school psychologists. Grouping of students for instruction is a controversial topic, as is deciding what information should inform the decision if grouping is to occur. There have been increasing pressures to reduce grouping, especially before high school.

Development of the Competencies

The results of the survey provided important information for the joint committee to finalize the *Competencies in Assessment and Evaluation for School Counselors*, which were approved in 1998 by both ASCA and AAC and published in 2001 (Joint Committee of the ASCA & the AAC, 2001).

The preface to the *Competencies* states: "The competencies can be used by counselor and assessment educators as a guide in the development and evaluation of school counselor preparation programs, workshops, in-services, and other continuing-education opportunities. They may also be used by school counselors to evaluate their own professional development and needs for continuing education" (Joint Committee of the ASCA and the AAC, 2001, p. 95). It should be emphasized that these competencies focus on the activities of individual counselors rather than the content of counselor education programs. However, they are consistent with existing Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2001) and National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC, 1991) standards.

The following definitions clarify the key terms used in the *Competencies*.

Competencies describes skills or understandings that a school counselor should possess to perform assessment and evaluation activities effectively.

Assessment is the gathering of information for making decisions about individuals, groups, programs, or processes.

Evaluation is the collection and interpretation of information to make judgments about individuals, programs, or processes that lead to decisions and future actions.

School counselors should have all of the nine competencies in the following list. (They should also have the specific skills listed in the *Competencies* document under each competency.)

1. School counselors are skilled in choosing assessment strategies.
2. School counselors can identify, access, and evaluate the most commonly used assessment instruments.

3. School counselors are skilled in the techniques of administration and methods of scoring assessment instruments.
4. School counselors are skilled in interpreting and reporting assessment results.
5. School counselors are skilled in using assessment results in decision making.
6. School counselors are skilled in producing, interpreting, and presenting statistical information about assessment results.
7. School counselors are skilled in conducting and interpreting evaluations of school counseling programs and counseling-related interventions.
8. School counselors are skilled in adapting and using questionnaires, surveys, and other assessments to meet local needs.
9. School counselors know how to engage in professionally responsible assessment and evaluation practices.

There are between three and six specific skills listed under each competency. For example, for Competency 9, the second skill listed is, "They can use professional codes and standards including the *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education, Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement, Responsibilities of Users of Standardized Tests,* and *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* to evaluate counseling practices using assessments" (Joint Committee of the ASCA and the AAC, 2001, p. 99). Together the skills constitute a comprehensive statement of what school counselors should know and be trained to do.

Conclusion

In 1998 a joint committee of ASCA and AAC outlined the assessment competencies recommended for school counselors. These nine recommended competency areas were based in part on surveys of school counselors and counselor educators regarding what they felt were essential and nonessential skills for practice in a school setting. Among the skills universally considered important were making decisions about which assessments to use, synthesizing results for use in treatment, and communicating and interpreting test results to parents and school personnel. In addition, knowing when and how to make

referrals and being knowledgeable about ethics and multicultural assessment were essential. Among less important skills were scheduling and administering tests and using that information to group students, perhaps reflecting school counselors' opinion that these expectations were an underutilization of their skill level.

Note

1. Committee members were Patricia Elmore (AAC, Chair 1997–2000), William Schafer (AAC, Chair 1993–1996), Ruth Ekstrom (AAC), Daren Hutchinson (ASCA), Marjorie Mastie (AAC), Kathy O'Rourke (ASCA), Thomas Trotter (ASCA), and Barbara Webster (ASCA).

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✦ Document is included in the Anthology of Assessment Resources CD

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